

The Shamanic Healing Experiences and Religious System Among *Uraly* Tribes of India ; A sociological Analysis

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Abstract—The present paper examines the traditional form of shamanic practices among *Urali* Tribe and studies shamanism as a religious system and a healing practice. *Uralies* have rich social and cultural heritage and an animistic religious life with their own dialect. They believe in Hill Gods, Sun, spirit and the ancestor souls. They also believe that the ancestor worship help them for their survival. In order to appeal the deities, spirit and ancestors, they perform a series of shamanic rituals. The major shamanic practices are performed by their religious headman, the *Pilathi* and is known collectively as *Cheppikkal* or *Eluppam kuth* with a shamanic kit; *Eluppam Petti* (*Eluppam box*).

This paper critically analyses the experience of shaman during shamanic initiation process which is believed as influenced by super natural being, the death and reincarnation experience of shaman, and the way the musical utterance and the rituals are performed. Also, it examines the psychological influence of ‘*Pilathi effect*’ on the members of tribe and also explore how a common member of the tribe attains the stature; the Shaman/*Pilathi*. Additionally, it describes the methods by which they perform the folk curing and protection of agriculture and the contemporary understanding of *Pilathi* practices.

Keywords—Ancestor worship, Animism, Shamanism, Tribe

I. INTRODUCTION

BELIEFS and rituals are those complementary. Though they are not based on rationality, practicality and thought, such faiths and rituals exists in the society for long. One it is in the case of tribal communities, it became more and more complex and tangled. We could feel such faith based tribal religion and nature are hampering the social, political, economic advance of those tribal communities. When we closely examine the tribal believes and its patterns we could find the interconnected dual aspects of animism and shamanism in it.

Through ages the simple word shamanism has transformed into a powerful concept. which even controlled and guided the lives of almost all tribes across the world. The word Shamanism is a Tungusic Evenki word which derived from the Sanskrit word *samana* or *srmana* which means wandering spirit or monk or devotes. Shamanism extends as a persuasive ritual practices among Red Indians, Eskimos, Aborigines of Australia and all the Tribes of Asia, Africa

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and Europe. We have with us the archaeological evidence that shamanism existed even some 40000 years ago. It is an important field of study for a researcher of old and new religions. This aspect of study on shamanism heavily contribute in the domains of cognitive neuroscience, social psychology, ecological psychology and therapy. We don't have enough serious studies on shamanism prevails among Indian tribes, especially in Kerala tribal social life. Among the three phases of research studies shamanism study was a medium to reveal the origin of tribal religion. The second phase collected ethnographic details from various cultures as an anthropological evolution. The third phase approach shamanism as a part of hermeneutical studies and interpret in a multicultural context.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- 1) To analyse the shamanic practice among *Uraly* tribe
- 2) To explore the Shamanic initiation process
- 3) To analyse the shamanic practices and its importance among the society

III. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Though heavily influenced by the Hindu and Christian faiths most of the tribes in Kerala have their own in depth religious beliefs. We could figure out these in the cultural, socio- political and other aspects of their social and inner life. As a notions and behavior of the tribal society as strongly based on such believes detailed studies and research on those beliefs are needed in order to up list them from their social backwardness. The research on shamanism among the tribes of Kerala became relevant in these circumstances. Shamanism strongly prevailed amount among the tribes in the state. The *Chat* of the *Kani* Tribe, the *Muramkulukk* of *Malayans*, *Bootha/ Pretha* of *Koragas* and *Eluppamkuthth* of *Uralys* are the examples of the shamanistic practices among the tribes of Kerala. For such rituals the songs, hymns and dances are performed in the midst of tribal musical instruments. At times floral carpets (*Kalam*) are made for exorcism.

IV. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Ancestor Worship

“The custom of venerating deceased ancestors who are considered still a part of the family and whose spirits are

believed to have the power to intervene in the affairs of the living”¹

B. Animism

Animism is the belief that a spirit, soul or divinity resides within every object and the belief emphasis that all the natural elements in the world have a special spiritual significance

C. Shaman

“A shaman is a person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, who typically enters into a trance state during a ritual, and practices divination and healing.”(Oxford Online)

D. Shamanism

The animistic practice of certain peoples of in which mediation between the visible and spirit worlds is effected by shaman

E. Tribe

“A tribe is a collection of families, bearing a common name, members to which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage profession or occupation and have developed a well assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligation.” (D.N.Majumdar,1962)

V. METHOD

A. Profile Area of The Study; Idukki

The present study is focus on Idukki District of Kerala which is known for its mountainous hills and rugged forest. Idukki is the second largest district and has an area of 4,479 KM2. The highest peak of South India and largest arch dam in Asia is located at this district. The district headquarters is Painavu and the distict is devided in to eight block panchayatha nd four taluks. Idukki is the second largest Scheduled Tribe populated District with numourous tribal community. The major communities are Hil Pulaya, Malai Arayan, Malai Pandaram, Mala Vedan,Mannan, Muthuvan , Ulladan and *Uralys*.



Fig. 1 Map of Idukki Distric

Fig. 1 Pie diagram of population Adiya Tribe. Source Census 2001

B. The People;Uralys

Among the eight communities this study conducted among *Uraly* tribes. One of the least acculturated tribal group of Kerala they are cultivators who adopted slash and burn cultivation and food gathering as their early livelihood strategy. Now they switched over to agriculture wage labour and settled agriculture. They living in about 33 settlements (kudi) of Idukki and a very small representation in Kottayam and Ernakulam district. The etymology of the term *Uraly* is rulers(*Ali or alunnavan*) of the land (*uru*) .

“There are 2099 families and 7559 population of *Uraly* community. Their population include 3848 males and 3711 females. As the male population outnumber the females, the sex ratio is 1000 : 964 which is a negative index of demographic growth. The family size is 3.60.as ”(Scheduled Tribe Development Department, Kerala, Survey)

They have their own tribal religious system which is considered as unique. But majority of them are Hinduized and a small population converted to Christianity.

C. The Methodology

For the present study two of the major *Uraly* tribal hamlets in Idukki district viz; *Pattayakkudi and Inchapparakkudi* were selected and this study used qualitative research methods and ethnographic design, particular with case study design model. There are two phases in this study. In the first part data collected through ethnographic technique like indepth interviews ,informal and unstructured discussions and participant observation. In the second phase, for the effectiveness and for the cross site, comparative and multi unit analysis of the study, used two case situations of two different male shamans out of seven case studies. This case study process employed individual informant interviews and verbal enquiry. The researcher participated in six different shamanic practices,in to of them as patient and the others as observer.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Believing that everything in the universe posses a soul/spirit and the souls have the special spiritual significance and important among the living can be defined as animism. Most of the tribes in the state follow the life based on this conviction. They assume that everything in the nature has a soul. The earth, stone, the trees and even every living things. They even believe that souls of death prevail among them. The thing they should be receipt. So the ancestral worships are the common factors among the tribal communities in the state. They strongly believe that the souls of the ancestors and it influence every walk of daily life from birth to death. They accept their presence in every rite the passage. The souls of the ancestors accompanies them in every activities from hunting to cultivation and things beyond their control as in rains and diseases. Both malevolent and benevolent souls are there. So to appease them always is very

important.

EB Taylor in his book *Primitive culture* defines religion as "the belief in spiritual beings" and argued that this belief exists in all known societies. He defined animism as having two parts: belief in the human soul that survives bodily death and belief in other spirits, including deities. Tylor believed that animism was the foundation of all religions. As H. Spencer also agrees the point. By summoning the souls which have great power of purge. They believe they could solve or create problem.

This process magical rituals of summoning the souls can be called shamanism and the man who conduct the process is called a shaman. *Plathi* is the shamman among *Uralys*. He is also called as *Pilathi*. She holds an important position in the society as the tribal chief. *Plathi* is called often to solve a problem to cast away calamities and diseases and to bring good fortune.

A. Uses of Shamanism

1. Shamanism are used to cure of ailments; both physical and mental.
2. Shamanism are used to in all agricultural purposes like for more crops, seed, for the protection of crops etc.
3. Against the wild animal.
4. For safe child birth
5. For Seducing.
6. For annihilating enemies.
7. To appease and to pacify all tribal and Jungle Godsthe tribe is infected with natural calamities or disease.

B. Shamanic Initiations; Steps to Spirit Worship

While researching on these aspects I came across 7 different Shamans. These mundane tribal's are picked all of a sudden to pretend the Mantle of a magic man. They seem to conceive the call of souls and Gods and suddenly transformed to a Shaman. This process can be defined as a shamanic initiation. Now we can go through the various important spirits and souls invoked through the Shamans. Souls like *Kannikal*, *Kandapiranikal*, *Velanmaar*, *Muththappan*, *Malamuthyamma*, *Munnodi*, *Purakodi sevakal*, *Pisachukkal*, *Kadavketti*, *Arukola*, *Chavaru*, *Kaduketti*, *Vanadevathamar*, *Nanchappan*, *Karanavanmar* comes down for initiation process. The souls are from both genders. An interesting fact in *Uraly* community is that a female soul only deals with a male Shaman and the male soul only communicate only with a female Shaman.

C. The Shamanic Journey Two Case Studies

Case #2 : Kayppidikkal Thenan (80): This nonagenarian is the main *Pilathi* of *Pattayakkudi*, remote jungle settlement of Idukki, Kerala. He was transformed to a Shaman in his late teen. He had a dream in his 19th year. *Kannimmar* a group of Goddesses of hills selected him as the magic man through dreams. He was examined through various hardships to prove his mettle and was taken into the deep of the jungle for the shamanic practices. He was taught on every aspects of the Souls and various magical hymns and how to conjure, control and summon them. He was then initiated to the techniques of

ailment cure, magic's, other secret methods, tribal medicinal techniques etc. He was then travers in as a soul along a dark hot cave undressing his skin and born structure of mortality. He recalled his body was then fragmented and molted in order to enclose in a small mud vessel. Withstanding all the acute sufferings, pains, pangs and thirst the hill spirits put him back in the mortal form after seven days. All these days his body was in a state of high fever devoid of food and water. The body resurrected in the 7th day he was transformed to the all powerful *Plathi*

Case #4 Kochu Pilla.(65) Though he is not a *Pilathi* in *Uraly* tribe, he holds a prominent position as a professional magic man. He too was initiated in to the dark world of magic by jungle spirits through dreams. He was carried to a deep ravine in the dense forest by the spirits. He have to face lot of hardships and trials to prove his worth in the ditch, slammed with poisoness snakes and crawling creatures. He felt he was suffering from burns and thrashes after withstanding the ordeal he proved his mettle and the appeased spirit bestowed him with secret magical power. On that day on wards he became a Shaman

D. The Prowess of a Shaman

According to the belief a shaman could summon and assemble all the spirits and souls in his command any time. They serve him and perform whatever he commands. The spirits; *Velans* will holds in the body of the Shaman as much time he likes. It is suppose to be a difficult task to hold a spirits in the body of the Shaman. It needs strict codes and restrains. He should avoid the presence of impure women, filths and dirt, crossing the excrements should be avoided, indulging with women are prohibited and celibacy is a must. If one of these is violated a shaman will lose all his powers and control over the spirits.

E. The Uraly Shamanic Ritual Practices

The shamanic ritual practices of the *Uraly* tribe is called *EluppamKuthth*. In this process the Shaman invokes the spirit in to a square shaped box known as *Eluppam Petti*. This process is called *Cheppikkal*. Lamps, *Kindi*; a unique shaped utensils to carry water, and bronze metal pieces are placed in the boxes which is made of fine reeds. Shaman shakes and shakes the box and calls upon the spirit to come down and settle in the box. This process of invoking the spirits or the calling down process is known as *Choothirakkal*.

When the tribes need the help of a shaman they approach him with offerings like wild ale, opium and money. When a man fell in ill the tribe call for the help of a shaman. The patient is asked to sit before the shaman. He will lit a bronze oil lamp (*Nilavilakk*) and begins *Eluppamkuthth*. Usually the process starts in the Dusk and night. In the background of the harsh sounds of the metal inside the box the shaman invokes the spirit in flat, low toned chants, by shaking the box. Gradually the whole process gains momentum and the shaman behave like possessed. At this point of time all the spectators around should go inside the huts and should close the door. They should put off the lights and should keep quiet. This proceeding is called *Kurikoottal*. When the spirits

are about descends the shaman goes in a trance. The spirit then converse with the magic man. The possessed shaman chanting magic hymns cast away the malady of the sick

F. The Techniques of Curing

Pilathi claims that the invoked spirits will do wonder in medicines given to the sick. Both medicines and magic are applied to cure the disease. The magical process called *Nellu niraththal* is done in between. The rice grain are collected in a flat faced called *Muram*. The grains are put the four corners of the holders with chanting hymns they are assemble together. Then the Shaman picks the grain and when he gets the single grain the forecast is supposed to be a bad one. When he gets a couple the outcome will be fine. This ritual is known as *Kanivekkal*. The *Pilathi* will place these grain over the head of the sick and the family members. He also ties a thread with turmeric paste around the waste of sick person. In the end of the process the spirits are suppose to help to recover

Chakanappiya This term refers to a il omen happens in the process of casting away the malady. When the lamps blown out all of a sudden during the process is termed as ill omen.

G. Shamanic Practice for Pregnant Women

It is believed that jungle demons and evil spirit are easily sees pregnant women. These bad spirits will make the delivery harder and even kill the mother and child. To avoid such calamities, shaman used to perform *Pettu Cheppiyoott*. This ritual is done normally in the seven and the half month of pregnancy.... Times tents are erected and decorated with tender coconut leaves. Then the Shaman chants to invokes spirit with the help *Eluppam petti*, the reed box. The pregnant lady is asked to sit inside a flooral carpet and the magic man shake the box just above her head and to appease the spirit. During the process a coconut is broken to identify the gender of the child. A thread is placed on the coconut and the shaman moves the nut around the head of the pregnant lady and breaks it later. One it falls with an open face the child will be a girl or otherwise it will be a boy. Then shaman ward off the bad spirits possessed the pregnant lady and she provides offering to Shaman.

H. Agricultural Practices and Shamanisam

Two rituals named as *Kariyoott* and *Idicchoott* are done related with cultivation.

Kariyoott: *Uralys* done their cultivation through the process burn and slash method or *poonam krishi*. They will find a suitable spot in the forest and then clear it. Then they burn old leaves to ashes and spread these over the cleared ground. Then they toast the ground and cultivate. There are a lot of shamanic practices related with cultivation

I. Shamanic Practices for Better Yield.

Tribal comes to the field cleared with fire woods. Everybody will then erect rice plants in the floor. *Pilathi* will then collect all these plants and chants hymns then rice are served in plantain leaves and the lamps with threads sobbed in coconut oil are placed above it and are being lighted. A

cock sacrifice is done to appease the mother Goddesses *Malamkurathi*. *Pilathi* then perform a *Eluppamkuththu* for a great yield. He is sure that the spirits have come to ate the process of sawing begins . It should be noticed that no kind of disturbances are allowed when the spirit descends to the ate. One should not urinate in the standing posture or try to catch fish or crab during the process. Impure women are not allowed in the premises. The Shaman will make an imaginary boundary around the field then. This is believed that a magic fence made of the soul of ancestors and *Kannimar*, the jungle spirits to ward of evil spirit. Then it is believed that no calamities caused by whether or wild animals will hamper the farm. By observing strict code of conduct it is believed that the spirit will guard the agriculture for long

J. Shamanic Practices for Keeping the Grains

This process is called *Kathiru polikkal*. Shaman starts to invoke the spirit by shaking the reed box, *eluppam petti*. He then commands to milk the left and right breasts of mother earth; *Bhoomatha* and the river Goddess *Ganga Bhoopathi*. Obliging the commands the spirit milk the breasts and fill the grain with it. Then the rice is matured.

K. Pest Controlling Chants or Chazhi Manthrangal

Shaman calls down the spirits to ward of the insects and pests which infects and invade the crops . He will avert these pest by magic crafts using different things taken from Snake wood trees (*Kanjiram*)

L. Harvesting Hymns

While applying the harvest hymns the spirits come down and enrich and multiply the grains as the waves in the sea.

M. Threshing Hymns

One threshing hymns are performed spirits pile up the grains in the feet of the people who thresh. The grains from the field are supposed to be collected in the secret storage cabins of the elements names earth, sky and water. The spirits collect this grain and stored there and deliver it in abundant while threshing.

N. Idicchoott

Idicchoott is a ritual process related with the slamming of the grain. The shaman makes a ritual stick called *Attakkol* by peeling of the layer of bamboo reeds and rapping it with turmeric paste. Tribes saw the first yield from the field and reach the aboard of *kani* or *Plathi*. Then they separate the grain from the grass by a reed mat and few males slams the grains and to flatten it to make a dish *avil*. Shaman again collect the flatten grains *avil* to the mat. Then he invokes the soul of ancestors to consume the dish made of the new rice grains. The males who slam the row grain then sit on the funnel shaped thick slamming stick and eat the dish with much reverence.

O. Kolu Thodal

Pilathi then collect these fresh farm grains to a small flat faced folder and put offerings in it. He then appeals to the spirit to take the offerings. This ritual is a form of thanks

giving for guarding the farm from wild animals, pests, demons and evil spirits. This process will repeat each year of farming.

P. Vavoott and Chathamoot

It is believed that all the ill fates and ailments in a house hold can be evaded if the souls of the ancestors are conjured and appeased. The death souls are known as *Malacchavar*. They are usually invoked during the month of July that is *Karkkidaka vavu*

Q. Shamanism Against Wild Animals

There are a number of shamanic magical rituals to ward off the threats of wild poisonous snakes, tigers and elephants. The spirits can hold a snake from its poisonous bite. By breaking a stick or placing a stone in a particular place it is believed that the serpent could not move further.

The approach of souls to ferocious tigers is quite different. The spirits make a big cage made of feathers of all varieties of birds in the world. Then they catch the cat and cage it and dispose it in a remote silver coloured sea in the western side during moon lit night. By this each and every aspect of a tribal life is connected and controlled by the shamanic practices. The *Pilathi*; the whole performman holds the great control and mastery over the spirits and souls ward off ailments and all fears.

R. The Sociological Analysis behind the Truth of Shamanism

When we analyse the process behind shamanism, its initiation and shamanic journey it is clear that spirit invocation can be a psychological disorder when we approached it in a scientific light. The mental imbalance is magnified in to a spiritual glorified and exalted position. We can define it as cultural bound syndrome and Sociologist and psychiatrists defines and asserts it as a psychic malady. The tribal society see it in a high esteem and reverence. Scientists say that fever, shivering and pain usually accompany such act of delusion, visual and auditory hallucination, syncope, possession, trance stage which are all the traits shown by a possessed shaman. They experience a lot of physical and mental pain and exertions during the transformation process. Shaman thinks that his body cut in to pieces by the spirits and melted to fit it in to a small mud vessel They even simply don't know that this glorified agony is only a part of psychic disorder. They even simply don't know that this glorified agony is a part of psychic disorder. Tribes like *Uralys*, *Adiya*, *kani* and *Malayans* etc still believe that it is due to the interference of souls and spirits to cast away the animals and evil.

VII. CONCLUSION

Apart from a curing method shamanic practices are rich tribal cultural symbols of tribes. It primarily works as a controlling device on the tribal social order. But it also possess myths, oral narratives, folklore and tribal knowledges and thus hold an important position in the society. *Pilathi*

;the shaman with his powers maintain the peace and order in the society. He could call the conflicts and strengthen the bonds. He has a power to control a person as a tribal leader does. We know that the shamanism is not a religion. It's a practice or a method. But it sometimes elevates from its mere position of conjuring and exorcism to a strongly knitted belief. It heavily influences the *Uraly* religious structure as a part of animism. Shamanism not even ward of the ailments of an individual but of a social conscience too. It does it with the consent of a social conscience which is ready to oblige by its psychological power itself

APPENDIX

1) List of Informants

Poomali Thevaki, Kayppitakkal Thenan, Damodaran, Gamgadharan, Kamachi, Kocchupilla, Omana, Sunumon

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Mrs. Poomali Thevaki & Family

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